The Good Samaritan’s new trouble: A study of the changing moral landscape in contemporary China

Modernization often involves changes in behaviour norms, values, and moral reasoning; China is by no means an exception. The present study focuses on a rare type of extreme immoral cases in which the Good Samaritan is extorted by the very person being helped. A particular effort is made to unpack why most extortionists of the Good Samaritan are elderly people. Despite its rare occurrence, cases of extorting Good Samaritans have seriously negative impacts on social trust, compassion, and the principle of reciprocity. Yet, a close analysis of the cases and public opinions reveals the complexity of the seemingly straight immoral behaviour, especially the tension between two moral systems and the challenge of dealing with strangers, which in turn reflect the changing moral landscape in contemporary Chinese society.

Key words Good Samaritan, morality, social change, the individual

On 11 July 2005, a high-school student named Chen saw a crowd at the central intersection of Bridgehead Town in Ningbo city of Zhejiang province. Like many curious residents, Chen went to see what was going on. A truck had hit a woman bicyclist who apparently was not a local resident. Both the truck driver and the crowd were blaming the woman for violating the traffic rules and causing the accident, while the helpless woman was sitting on the ground in pain. Chen did not think twice before calling a cab to bring the injured woman to the local hospital. After arriving at the hospital, he found that the truck driver was not there. Good-hearted Chen then paid about 200 yuan for the woman’s medical treatment because she claimed that she did not have money. Chen felt good about his generous behaviour until later when the entire episode went terribly wrong.

Chen was shocked to find that ultimately the woman ended up accusing him of complicity with the runaway truck driver and was demanding an additional 500 yuan in

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compensation. Confused, scared, and beginning to panic, young Chen called his father who soon arrived at the hospital together with a local policeman. Although Chen told his father and the policeman that he had only been trying to be kind to the injured stranger on the street, the woman, insisting that Chen was covering up for the truck driver, argued: ‘If you do not know the driver, then why the heck did you send me to the hospital and pay for my medical expenses?’ No one, including the policeman, disputed the woman’s logic. The policeman asked Chen to produce evidence showing that he indeed had not known the truck driver. Chen had no such proof and his father eventually had to pay another 500 yuan.

The drama took another radical turn when Chen returned to the site of the accident to retrieve his bicycle. He found that a shop owner at the scene had secretly recorded the license plate number of the truck. With the plate number, the local police were able to locate the truck driver who claimed that he had indeed gone to the hospital, but, not finding Chen or the injured woman, he had left. Through police mediation, the truck driver gave Chen a total of 700 yuan to cover his losses. Although Chen was eventually found innocent and recovered his money, he was not at all happy, saying: ‘I did not expect to be rewarded when I helped another person, but I never thought that I would be framed and extorted by the person whom I helped! I really don’t know if I will help out again if I encounter a similar situation in the future’ (Zheng and Shi 2005).

In Chinese discourse, cases like Chen’s are often referred to as ‘zuo haoshi bei e’ meaning attempting to be helpful but ending up as the victim of extortion. The English word ‘extortion’ does not quite capture the meaning of the Chinese word ‘e,’ as in the Chinese phrase ‘zuo haoshi bei e’ because the verb ‘e,’ connotes the double meaning of (1) falsely charging an innocent person for one’s injury or loss, and (2) forcing an innocent person to provide financial compensation for the injury or loss. In everyday usage, the English term ‘extortion’ refers to a criminal offence whereby one party obtains money, property, or service from another party through coercion or intimidation/threat, such as members of organised crime demanding protection fees. Yet, an extortionist does not need falsely to accuse an innocent party for a wrongdoing. For the lack of a better choice in English, throughout this paper I refer to what Chen experienced as ‘extraordinary extortion.’

A compassionate and generous person who helps a stranger in distress, as Chen in the above-mentioned case, is commonly called a Good Samaritan in the English-speaking world, a term that derives directly from the Bible. In mainland China, Chen would be called a living Lei Feng, after the model PLA solider in the 1960s who selflessly helped others and devoted his entire life to socialism. In contemporary Western societies doctors or people with medical knowledge may be called upon to assist a sick or injured person. If they unintentionally cause harm to the person they were attempting to help, they may be sued. This has become known as the Good Samaritan’s dilemma between the imperative of helping a person in need and possible liability if anything goes wrong (see e.g., Williams 2003). In pre-reform China I do not know of any incidences of a Good Samaritan’s dilemma. By contrast, stories like Chen’s are reported frequently by the media and provoke heated discussions on the Internet. In real life, although only a few people have actually experienced attempts at extortion, almost everyone in China has now heard such stories. To many ordinary Chinese, extortion by the very person one is attempting to help is a morally disturbing development. To stress this important disjunction, I refer to the Chinese case as the ‘Good Samaritan’s new trouble’ as in the title of this article.

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My analysis here is based on 26 cases of extraordinary extortion – 20 from media reports and 6 from interviews with the person involved, interviews with 38 people regarding how these cases should be viewed, plus online comments and reflections in personal blogs on such social phenomena. An immediate question is how representative these cases are. It should be noted that not every case of extraordinary extortion makes the news headlines or television reports. In fact, a great majority of these cases are settled privately, as indicated in my own interviews. Yet it also is true that these cases are exceptional in everyday life and therefore receive disproportionately more attention from the media and become hot topics of online discussions. There is no way accurately to measure the actual incidence of extraordinary extortions. Yet, even if these cases do not happen very often, the fact that they receive so much media attention in today’s information society is indicative of their perceived importance and gives them a much greater impact on the minds and behaviour of ordinary people.

Hypothetically, the impact of media reports and personal stories by word of mouth may be positive in terms of condemning the behaviour of extorting a Good Samaritan and revealing the existence of Good Samaritans. The widespread disapproval and denunciation of the extortionist could also generate strong pressure from public opinion against potential extortionists. On the other hand, these same stories may also spread the message that there are indeed risks in helping others, thus discouraging or even preventing ordinary people from becoming Good Samaritans. As extreme and rare as they are, the cases of extorting Good Samaritans constitute an actually existing social fact which can only be understood in the larger context of the changing moral landscape during the reform era.

Although it is widely recognised that in a rapidly transforming society like China behavioural norms, ethics, values, and moral reasoning are also undergoing radical changes, to date there have been few systematic empirical studies. At a rather abstract level, the rise of utilitarianism, materialism, and other individual-oriented values has been regarded as an ethical shift from communist asceticism to consumerist hedonism (Ci 1994; Wang 2002). Although not focusing explicitly on moral discourse and practices, some recent ethnographies of rural China reveal worrisome indicators of a moral vacuum (Liu 2000) or the rise of an egotistic culture (Yan 2003), while other studies show the continuity of traditional virtues (Oxfeld 2004). Yet, the development of volunteerism and philanthropy, the mushrooming of various NGOs, and the growth of rights movements point to the emergence of a new kind of moral reasoning beyond personal relations and the expansion of compassion, sympathy, and assistance to unrelated strangers (see Jankowiak 2004; Li 2006; Thelle 2004; Weller 2005; and Wonacott 2004). The often-contradictory accounts of China’s moral landscape derive partially from the complexity of reality itself and partially from the shortage of empirical studies of moral discourse and practices in specific contexts.

In the following pages, I will first examine the main features of the extraordinary extortion cases. It is noteworthy that most extortionists of Good Samaritans are senior

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2 I only selected cases in which the helper was proven to have been the Good Samaritan by either witness testimony, the withdrawal of the accusation by the injured party, or identification of the person who was responsible for the injury. There are reported cases in which the disputes between the helper and the helped remain unresolved, such as the famous case of Mr Peng Yu versus Mrs Xu in Nanjing in 2007 (more on this below). Although public opinion is overwhelmingly supportive of the helper as the Good Samaritan, it remains possible that the helper is indeed guilty. Such cases are not used in this article.
citizens who otherwise should be the recipients of social compassion and respect. In the second section, I explore the impact of extraordinary extortion cases on the society at large and argue that, despite its rare occurrence, extortion of Good Samaritans constitutes a heavy blow to social trust, compassion, and the principle of moral reciprocity. In the third section, I draw attention to several social causes which, working in tandem, may have contributed to the rise of this form of deeply disturbing behaviour. I conclude the article by discussing the broader implications for our understanding of the moral landscape in contemporary China.

The extraordinary nature of the extortion cases

Extraordinary extortion cases typically occur in an urban setting when someone is injured in a car accident or struck by a sudden illness. Without exception, they all take place in a public space, typically on a busy street or in the hospital where the injured receives medical treatment. In most cases the dispute between the helper and the helped is therefore witnessed by others. Media reports of extortion cases come from a variety of cities. Two cases from my interviews occurred in county seats, but there were no cases reported from the countryside.

Among the 26 cases, only two occurred in the evening, but this only means that good-hearted people are more likely to help a stranger in distress during the day when it is relatively safe to do so. Nearly 90 percent of the people whom I interviewed asserted that they would not stop to help someone lying on the street at night. In a personal blog reflection, the author recalls that, because of the fear of being extorted, he finally decided to walk away from a drunken man who was lying on the street during a cold and rainy autumn night, only to discover the following morning that the victim had died on the spot (A Jing 2007).

In one of the two cases that occurred at night, the Good Samaritan, an artist who was driving home at midnight, saw a badly drunk person lying in the middle of road. He first debated with himself for a long time about whether he should help the person because of the fear of being extorted. He finally conducted the good deed only after he found another young man to serve as a witness; both of them took the extra step to make a written statement to the local police (Cui 2007). In the second case that occurred at night, the Good Samaritan simply stopped helping the injured person and left the scene when he began to sense that the latter was holding him responsible for the injury. ‘I was fortunate,’ said the interviewee, ‘that no one was watching us so I could just leave. If there had been any onlookers, it would have been difficult to walk away even though the old lady was about to extort me.’

Most helpers were young or middle-aged men, but there were also some young women, including two teenage girls. In cases where more background information was available, most helpers belonged to the urban middle class, including teachers, business people, or white collar professionals, while others were taxi drivers or students. The injured people were more homogenous: except for three middle-aged women, all were senior citizens, and 20 out of the 26 were female.

Onlookers also play a role in the drama of extraordinary extortion. People in China are quite curious about any unusual happenings they may see in a public place, and their curiosity is naturally sparked when they see others paying particular attention to any

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3 Interview in Beijing, July 18, 2006.
incident on the street. As a result, a crowd will quickly gather, known in Chinese as weiguan (forming a circle to watch something). When there are bystanders, the elderly generally have the upper hand in two respects when they hold their helper responsible for the initial injury. First, because they are perceived as the weaker and more vulnerable party, they tend to win the initial sympathy of the onlookers, which in turn increases the risks for the helper. Second, they can also resort to the tactics of the game of face (mianzi) to apply extra pressures on the helper. For instance, when accusing a helper, they often cry out in pain, or do other things to embarrass the helper. In a one-on-one confrontation, the person who is considered higher in social status, and thus possessing bigger face, is more vulnerable to losing face, whereas the other party with a lower social status has much less at stake and thus can be more aggressive (Hu 1944). It is in such a context that extortion becomes more likely.

The unwillingness of the bystanders to become involved, much less to serve as witnesses, also increases the chances for successful extortion. In one case, after being extorted, the helper returned to the street intersection where he had helped an injured old lady in front of a crowd of bystanders and made a public plea for help from a witness. More than two-dozen people from the neighbourhood saw the incident and some even offered water or a towel when he was trying to move the victim to the hospital. Yet no one, including the nearby shop owners who later talked to a reporter, was willing to serve as a witness. Some were willing to confirm the helper’s innocence in private with a journalist, whereas others commented that the helper would not have incurred such problems if he had not offered help in the first place (Xiao 2005).

Disbelief in unselfish compassion

In the opening tale in this article, the woman extortionist’s most forceful argument against her helper is: ‘If you do not know the driver, then why the heck did you send me to the hospital and pay my medical expenses?’. The assumption behind this argument is clear and straightforward, that is, no one would help a stranger simply out of compassion. No one at the scene, including the police, disputed the woman’s logic, and thus the pressure was on Chen to explain why he helped. This is precisely the reason why Chen could not defend his innocence and eventually had to pay 500 yuan to the extortionist.

It has become a pattern that the more assistance a helper offers to a victim, such as to take the person to the hospital or to help pay for medical expenses, the more vulnerable the helper is in terms of defending her/his innocence. In a well-known case, a taxi driver was accused of doing too much for a victim of a car accident because after picking up the woman and sending her home, the driver also visited her and left some money after learning of her financial difficulties. Two years later, the woman’s family sued the cab driver for more than 250,000 yuan, arguing that the woman had permanent brain damage due to the accident caused by the cab driver. Their case was built around the central evidence that the cab driver had continued to help the woman after sending her home. ‘No one would do that in today’s world’, argued the family and their lawyer. This argument was challenged after court investigators and the media determined that the driver had been involved in other similar acts of selflessness, going the extra mile to help those in need. Because of his good deeds, he had been previously featured twice in the local media as a living Lei Feng, namely, a Good Samaritan (Zhang 2006).
Other cases show that when a helper simply helps the injured party stand up, the latter’s attempt to extort does not prevail because the argument of ‘why did you help me if you were not responsible for my injury’ is not strong enough. This occurred in four out of the 26 cases I examined. Better yet, when the helper tries to help but does not take any serious action, as shown in one case, the extortion attempt is immediately identified by the onlookers and condemned (Shen 2007).

In 12 out of the 26 cases, either the police were called to the spot or the courts became involved after the extortionist lodged a lawsuit against the helper. Without exception, the law enforcement officer or the judge never challenged the extortionist’s argument of ‘why did you help if you did not hurt me?’. Instead, the policeman or the judge demanded that the helper produce evidence showing his innocence, normally asking the helper to find a witness, while, at the same time, the extortionist was not asked to provide any witnesses or other evidence. By so doing, the policeman or the judge actually reveal their preconceived bias that no one would go an extra mile to help a stranger. The influence of this rather popular prejudice in the legal system is most clearly shown in the 2007 case of Mr Peng versus Mrs Xu in Nanjing city.

In this civil dispute, Mr Peng, who was in his late thirties, insisted that he saw an old lady, Mrs Xu, lying on the ground when he got off a bus. He assisted Mrs Xu and escorted her to the hospital; he also lent her 200 yuan to pay the hospital admission fee. Peng’s testimony was supported by a witness, who, however, did not see the person who had initially pushed Mrs Xu to the ground. According to Mrs Xu, Mr Peng was the person who pushed her to the ground during the rush of getting off the bus. Again, she made the same argument: if Peng had not been responsible, then why would he have escorted her to the hospital and paid her hospital fee? The court found Mrs Xu’s argument reasonable and ruled that Mr Peng had to pay 45,876 yuan to Mrs Xu. According to the court ruling, Mr Peng’s behaviour was against the logic of common sense on two accounts: (1) if he was truly a living Lei Feng (or Good Samaritan), he should have first caught the person who was responsible for the accident; and (2) if he was not responsible, he would have left Mrs Xu with her family members, instead of accompanying her to the hospital (Court Ruling #212, 2007). The court ruling caused public outrage widely. Many people believed that Peng had been a Good Samaritan and Xu a greedy money grabber; they were especially angry about the judge’s claim that it is commonsense that no one would go so far out of the way to help a stranger.4

The moral damages of extraordinary extortion

Due to extraordinary extortions and the widespread diffusion of stories about such cases through the media and other channels, a new consensus has emerged, that in today’s world it is both unwise and unsafe to help a stranger in a public place. This fear of being wrongly accused and subject to extortion is strengthened each time a new case of extraordinary extortion is reported through the media or word of mouth. An

4 More than 20 newspapers reported the case and many of them were critical of the court ruling. Online discussions in various fora were almost completely critical. Mounting pressure of public opinion forced the court to reconsider its ruling at a second trial. Eventually, the two parties settled through mediation outside court. When later asked by the media why he settled, Mr Peng, who previously had been quite outspoken, stated that he had nothing to say and that he merely wanted to put the entire episode behind him (Suo 2008).
indicator of this widespread fear is that many foreign visitors are advised not to help any stranger by their Chinese friends.\(^5\)

Needless to say, such widespread fear has considerably reduced the willingness to engage in compassionate acts among ordinary people and thus has undermined the foundation of Chinese ethics. Traditionally, compassion (ce yin) is regarded as an aspect of ren (benevolence) that is an inherent condition inside each person. This sense of compassion becomes the strongest when one witnesses the suffering of the weak and helpless. The cases of extraordinary extortion, however, force many people to question the value of compassion since the actions of the victim may become a nightmare for a compassionate Good Samaritan. Furthermore, extraordinary extortion has struck a fatal blow to the notion of bao, or reciprocity, which is another basic principle of moral behaviour. With a belief in reciprocity, people know that if one treats another party well, the latter will reciprocate with similar acts of kindness (Yang 1957). However, if one receives critical help from someone during an emergency, the help received is called enqing, the highest kind of favour, similar to the Japanese notion of on (see Lebra 1969).

It is considered proper behaviour not only to make an equal return to the helper, but also to remember the help forever and do much more to show one’s gratitude (Stafford 2000; Yan 1996: 143–145). As a number of interviewees commented, to be rescued from an accident or from a sudden ailment on the streets is a life-saving enqing that can never be fully paid back. Therefore, to extort one’s life saviour is the worst kind of violation of the moral code.

A belief in reciprocity is one of the basic conditions of trust in interpersonal relations, and the expansion of personal trust to social trust functions as one of the key mechanisms in a modern economy and society (Giddens 1990). How to promote social trust, however, has become an urgent issue in contemporary Chinese society. Due to widespread official corruption, financial scams, faulty goods, and deceptive business transactions, China is witnessing a decline, instead of an increase, of social and personal trust (Peng 2003: 292–295; see also Wang and Liu 2003; and Zheng 2002). While violating the principle of reciprocity, extraordinary extortion also reinforces distrust of out-group people, especially strangers in public contexts. As a college student reflected: ‘If the person whom I just helped turns out to be my enemy, who else can I trust? Probably only my family and best friends. Society really is a dangerous place.’\(^6\) The student had good reason to be fearful because she was one of the Good Samaritans being extorted.

A further moral damage resulting from cases of extraordinary extortion is the justification and even encouragement of social indifference. As the Good Samaritan becomes vulnerable to wrongful accusations and has to defend herself or himself against not only the extortion but also against the widespread suspicion of good deeds among law enforcement officers, public opinion has changed from condemning the extortion behaviour to articulating arguments in favour of self-protection. This is most obviously reflected in the commentaries of the onlookers, such as ‘the helper would not have been in trouble if he had not helped in the first place’. Gradually, helping a stranger is coming to be regarded as a mindless and silly act, instead of compassionate or heroic. To protect their children, many parents use stories of extortion to teach their precious single child

\(^5\) On different occasions, three American students told me that they had been warned by their Chinese friends that they should not help strangers in the streets because of the danger of extortion.

\(^6\) Interview in Shanghai, July 8, 2007.
never to reach out to help a stranger. In one case that resulted in an online debate, an old lady fell and was left on the ground for quite a while because none of the onlookers was willing to help. When a five- or six-year-old girl suggested that her mother help the old lady, the mother scolded her daughter. After the story was reported by the news media, there was an online discussion debating whether the mother did the right thing. Among the 21 commentaries, 17 reported that mother was right to scold the little girl and leave the scene. Two suggested better ways than scolding to teach the child be smarter and self-protective, whereas only two disagreed, arguing that the mother should teach her daughter compassion and kindness (Huang 2006).

All the 38 people with whom I conducted interviews on extraordinary extortion cases said that they fully understood why few individuals are willing to reach out to help strangers. Only six interviewees asserted that regardless of the potential risks they would still offer to help a stranger in need, and a majority of the interviewees (18 people) said that one should make sure that the situation was free from extortion.

**Contributing factors to the extraordinary extortion phenomenon**

As indicated above, the majority of extortionists are the elderly, most of whom are female. As victims of traffic accidents or sudden illnesses, these people are in a disadvantageous economic and social position. None of them had ever before engaged in extortion. They were ordinary people who wanted to be compensated for their physical suffering or to cover their medical bills. The question is: what makes these otherwise ordinary citizens become involved in extortion scams and abuses of compassion and reciprocity, the very basic virtues in all of human society?

There is no lack of general and convenient explanations about the macro causes of social problems in contemporary China, including moral decline under the impact of rapid social change, social transition from a communist planned economy to a market economy, and consumerist ideology that promotes instant individual gratification. As far as the moral changes are concerned, it is also common to find the cause in the early attack on traditional values at the turn of the last century, the rise of the Maoist moral system and its negative impact on Chinese society, and the vacuum left by the demise of both traditional and Maoist moral values.

In my view, all of these explanations are too general to offer an insightful interpretation of any specific issue; nevertheless, they are helpful in terms of providing a descriptive and general account of the social context in which a given social problem, such as the extortion of a Good Samaritan, should be examined and understood. While recognizing the importance of the general social context, I would like to emphasise three more specific factors that are directly related to the cases of extraordinary extortion, namely, the legal loopholes that allow an extortion attempt to be almost cost-free, feelings of deprivation that motivate an extortion attempt, and the relationally-based morality that justifies hostility toward strangers.

**The problems of the legal system**

Many countries have enacted specific laws to protect good-hearted helpers from being sued during their acts of kindness, which can be further divided into strong or weak
laws. In countries like Italy, France, and Japan, for example, the law specifically requires that citizens help others in distress, unless doing so will put oneself in harm’s way. In the latter case, citizens are still required to call the local emergency number. This is why the photographers at the scene of Princess Diana’s fatal accident in 1997 were investigated for violating the French Good Samaritan law. In the United States and Canada, however, the law does not require that citizens offer help; yet, it does protect helpers of a good deed on the basis of good faith even if the assistance causes extra pain or injury to the helped. The Good Samaritan laws protect both the individual helpers and the virtues of compassion and mutual assistance among strangers. As a recent study in the UK shows, despite the potential problems, most medical doctors are willing to be Good Samaritans (Williams 2003).

In contrast, China not only does not have a Good Samaritan law to require citizens to help or to protect the helper, but also lacks an effective legal tool to punish those who attempt to extort a Good Samaritan. This, in my opinion, creates a legal loophole that encourages extortion. According to the leader of a police team in Shanghai, in their daily work of maintaining social order on the streets, extortion (e ren) is classified as a type of civil dispute and thus can only be resolved through mediation. The closest punishable criminal act is called qiaozha lesuo, meaning purposely using threats to extort money. When I asked why most cases of extorting a Good Samaritan are not punished by law, the police shrugged it off by saying that these are simply not crimes punishable by the law. ‘What can you do when an old and poor lady tries to squeeze 200 or 300 yuan out of the pocket of a young man?’ he responded to me, and then he quickly added: ‘nothing!’.

Indeed, in all 26 cases, the law enforcement officers or the judges did nothing to punish the extortionist, even after the accused helper was eventually cleared. For example, in the case cited at the beginning of this article, although Chen recovered his 500 yuan from the truck driver, the extortionist was not punished for wrongly accusing Chen and still walked away with 500 yuan. In another case in Harbin city, an old lady was caught extorting her helper by a number of onlookers and was brought to the police. Yet, despite the testimony of two witnesses, the police still asked the falsely accused Good Samaritan to take the old lady to a local hospital and to share the medical bill (Reporter 2006). In other cases, including the above-mentioned 2007 case of Mr Peng versus Mrs Xu in Nanjing, the police or the court required the helper to produce an eyewitness; yet in none of the 26 cases was the extortionist asked to provide a witness.

Interestingly, according to several people I interviewed, the best the law enforcement can do is to advise the public that, before helping a stranger on the street, one should keep the scene intact and secure a witness who can testify on behalf of the Good Samaritan. Such advice for Good Samaritans has effectively made the act of helping others sound like a well-planned criminal offence. As some comment, if one has to make so much effort to help another person, why should one do it in the first place?

Social inequality and the justification of extortion

At the surface level, many of the extortionists – especially some of the old ladies – extorted the Good Samaritan so that they could pay their hospital bills, and the limited amount of money that they extorted seems to support this claim. In other cases, receiving an extra amount of cash would be a big financial windfall for a poor family. In
at least two cases, the senior citizen was forced by family members to extort financial compensation from the Good Samaritan.

For example, a man named Hu Maodong saved the life of an old lady who fell on the icy ground on a snowy day in 2001, hiring a taxi to take the old lady to the hospital and paying the hospital registration fee. Later, when the old lady’s son arrived at the hospital with several of his friends, Hu was extorted for being responsible for the old lady’s fall. The old lady explained the true situation to her children but eventually gave in because of her son’s threat. Hu ended up paying the extortionist 500 yuan. Driven by guilt, the old lady later found Hu and wanted to pay him back 1,000 yuan (Ma and Lu 2005).

This case leads one to wonder how an otherwise kind elderly person can justify the act of extorting a good-hearted helper. Pressure from others certainly was a justification, but this only occurred twice among the 26 cases I collected. It is virtually impossible to find an answer from an elderly person who engaged in extortion, because even if the extortion was later exposed, they all denied any intent to extort, and, in a few cases, would only admit that they had misidentified the responsible person. In the absence of the extortionist’s perspective, I have to rely on my interviews and on public opinion about extortion cases for clues.

When asked how elderly people can justify an act of extorting a helper, my informants singled out three possible motivations, all of which are related to the differences in status between the victim and their helper. The most common reason was the financial needs of the elderly, identified in 30 out of the 38 interviews. Some also added that the victims were too poor to afford proper medical treatment. ‘It is very important to catch someone to pay the bill, no matter who it may be’, asserted one interviewee. Several also speculated that the elderly might get confused and misrecognise the Good Samaritan as the person who caused the initial harm. Once having a story, the elderly person has to stick to it, because otherwise there will be no one who can be held responsible.

The second possible justification, according to 18 of the interviewees, was the idea that the loss of a few hundred yuan would do no harm to a person with deep pockets. Because most helpers were young and relatively affluent, or at least better off than their extortionist, it was justifiable to force the helper pay the bill. One interviewee in Shanghai told me that this is exactly what she heard from a neighbour who in 2003 had been pushed down and hurt in a crowd at a subway station. Although the neighbour could not identify the person who had knocked her down, the old lady grabbed a young man’s arm and eventually managed to make him pay 300 yuan. When questioned whether the young man was indeed responsible, the neighbour replied that the young man had a lot of money and was not hurt, even though he did not cause the fall.

A few scholars who I asked the same question point out that the increasing social inequalities may play a role as well. Despite rapid economic growth and the enrichment of some, many in the working class in the cities and villagers in the countryside feel that they have been left behind and abandoned by the elitist reform programme. Such feelings of deprivation are particularly strong among the elderly because of their meagre income, isolation from public life after retirement and inability to adapt to the rapid social changes. Such a victim psychology may develop into a more aggressive form of social discontent and resentment of the rich among the elderly, which in turn may justify the act of taking advantage of the Good Samaritans, many of whom are young and perceived as rich.

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Indeed, the public resentment against the new rich class has been a hot topic widely reported in the Chinese media, along with an increasing number of violent criminal cases that specifically targeted rich people. According to Shen Jie (2006), the most hated are the people who enrich themselves through illegitimate means or who treat ordinary people badly in social interactions. Shen adds that this kind of public resentment is understandable but unjustifiable, because social differentiation is a necessary part of modernization. To ease the social tension, Shen, like many others, calls for new government policies and regulations to help disadvantaged groups. What is perhaps purposely kept implicit here is that the rapid widening of the gap between the rich and poor actually runs against the fundamental principles of socialist morality of egalitarianism and self-sacrifice. In addition to the various rationalizations at the individual level, it is very likely that the elderly, who were brought up under the radical socialism during the Mao era, were driven in part by this egalitarian and collective morality to take revenge on the new rich, an aspect that can hardly be explored in the Chinese media, which has to be supportive of market reform.

**Particularistic morality and hostility toward strangers**

The notion of a stranger has different meanings for the elderly and the young. According to Fei Xiaotong, traditional Chinese society is organised through a differentiated mode of association in which individuals are positioned in a hierarchy of various relations, such as that between parents and children, husband and wife, and between friends. Moral rights and duties are defined and fulfilled differently in accordance with one’s position in a given relationship. Many of the behavioural norms and moral values do not apply to people who are outside one’s network of social relationships. ‘A society with a differential mode of association is composed of webs woven out of countless personal relationships. To each node in these webs is attached a specific ethical principle’ (Fei 1992 [1947]: 78). With greater social distance, suspicion and hostility increase, even becoming dominant when dealing with strangers (Chen 2006: 118–155).7

Although this particularistic morality was attacked during the heyday of Maoist socialism, and the state made radical attempts to promote a new set of universalistic values of socialist morality (Madsen 1984; Vogel 1965), the divide between in-group and out-group people remained strong throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, in the name of revolution and class struggle, hostility toward a political stranger – the people who were labelled as the class enemy – was actually encouraged and developed to an extreme level of brutality and violence (Gong 1996).

By this logic of ethical thinking, the extortionists may easily justify their behaviour because their helpers are strangers, completely outside their own circle of social relations. In contrast, younger people, particularly the current generation of Chinese youth, work in a market economy where the scope of social interactions has greatly expanded and notions of behaviour toward strangers have changed accordingly. It is not accidental that most Good Samaritans are young or middle-aged, because they tend to

7 In his well-known study of the typology of reciprocity, Marshall Sahlins notes that in many simple societies morality, much like reciprocity, is also sectorally organised and relative in accordance with the variations of social distance (Sahlins 1972: 196–200). The contextual morality in Melanesian societies is related to the local notion of personhood which is relationally defined (Barker 2007).
hold more universalistic moral values and do not have the same kind of hostility toward strangers. When a young Good Samaritan is extorted, his or her typical reaction is shock at the accusation and then confusion. This, plus the embarrassment of being scolded by an elderly person in public, often renders a young Good Samaritan speechless. This explains why so many Good Samaritans facing these circumstances simply choose to pay and leave. It is particularly intriguing, as indicated above, that most young people whom I interviewed still express willingness to help strangers despite their fear of extortion. Several explained to me that one should have a positive and tolerant attitude toward strangers because in today’s society one has to deal with strangers all the time.

Recent evidence supporting this observation is the fact that the majority of the 100,000-plus volunteers who rushed to Sichuan at their own expense to help the earthquake victims shortly after the disaster on 12 May 2008 were in their twenties (Cha 2008). When asked why, many of them responded that they were moved by the suffering of the victims and thus they wanted to offer their help. Their compassion toward strangers is quite different from that in traditional China and, to a certain extent, it resembles the moral of the Good Samaritan parable in the Bible, that is, humanity’s bonds in brotherhood should transcend geographical, racial, economic and social boundaries.8

Concluding remarks: the changing moral landscape in China

At first glance, the extortion of Good Samaritans appears to be a clear indication of the moral decline in contemporary Chinese society, as basic moral principles of compassion and reciprocity are violated. The thirst for money and the pursuit of utilitarian individualist values, encouraged by market competition and the commercialisation of social life, seem to be the direct cause for such a moral decline because they were virtually unheard of before the reform era. Yet, a closer look reveals the complexity of the implications of these cases.

Most extortionists are elderly and relatively poor people who, under the stress of both physical pain and economic loss (the cost of receiving medical treatment), make every effort to find someone responsible. This effort to seek compensation may have no bounds when an elderly person encounters a stranger because according to traditional ethics one bears fewer moral responsibilities toward a stranger. The impact of the existing social inequalities between an elderly extortionist and a young and affluent Good Samaritan further complicates these cases, as indicated both by the people whom I interviewed and in the hesitation of the law enforcement agencies to punish the elderly extortionists. Although the nature of extorting a Good Samaritan remains morally disturbing, a more complete consideration of these factors enables us to better understand why such behaviour occurs and how it is justified.

Moreover, turning our attention to the other side of the extortion cases we also find some positive moral changes. First, despite the widespread stories of Good Samaritans being extorted since the mid-1990s and the associated fears among the populace,

8 It is estimated that more than one-quarter of a million volunteers had gone to Sichuan by early July 2008, the majority of whom were young people born in the 1980s.
good-hearted citizens continue to offer help to strangers in distress. Each new report of extraordinary extortion, while condemning the extortion behaviour and reminding the public of the potential risks of helping out, also sends a message about universalistic notions of love and care. This is perhaps why a number of my interviewees emphasised that the majority of people in society are good-hearted.

Furthermore, as more cases of extraordinary extortion are reported, actions to protect Good Samaritans have begun to emerge. The most common is through the power of public opinion on online forums, as shown in the above-mentioned 2007 civil lawsuit of Peng versus Xu in Nanjing city. The non-involvement of bystanders has begun to change in recent years. In several cases, bystanders openly criticised the attempted extortion or provided testimony to the police. Because of the bystanders’ active involvement, the Good Samaritan was protected and the attempted extortion failed (Shenghuo bao 2006; Shen 2007).

Three broader implications emerge from the present study. First, the occurrence of extortion cases points to the challenges brought about by increased social interaction among strangers in public places. The increased interaction among strangers results from China’s rapid transition from a planned economy to a market economy, from a closed society under the rigid institutions of class labelling, household registration, assigned work units and political dossiers to an open society with high mobility and fewer institutional constraints on individual freedom (Tang and Parish 2000). Moral values and behavioural patterns seem to lag behind the fast-changing economy and social structure.

Dealing with strangers poses an urgent challenge for every Chinese individual, regardless of his or her moral orientation. For those who are still deeply embedded in particularistic and contextual morality, the immediate challenges include the cultivation of social trust beyond one’s personal networks and the acceptance of some universal moral values that apply to both related and unrelated people. For those who already have overcome the fear and distrust of strangers, interactions with those who still cling to contextual morality become problematic, as shown in the cases of extortion of the Good Samaritans. Generational differences seem to play a role here. It is common that in new urban communities elderly people tend initially to be cold and suspicious of new neighbours but later they develop close interpersonal relations with some of them; in contrast, young people are nice and polite from the beginning, but they continue to remain distant and rarely participate in community affairs.

To make the matter even more complicated, nowadays most Chinese citizens are dealing with strangers in the context of a highly competitive market economy and increasingly risky society. The market-driven modernization project not only brings in a new kind of universal ethics but the ideology of individualism that posts new threats to many forms of sociality and collective morality. The pursuit of self-interest and individual gratification in certain circumstances can lead to extreme egocentric and antisocial behaviour. It seems that in a modern society, all people (rich, poor, young and old) have to draw on multiple sources of morality to create a liveable social environment around themselves, including particularistic networks, the conjugal family, socialist or religiously informed ideas of brotherhood, egalitarianism and fairness, individualism, and the renewal of the public spirit. These systems are not simply mutually exclusive, but with the new challenges that arise in contemporary China, often are allowed to exist side-by-side or are combined in new and perhaps unexpected ways. The most intriguing point about the extortion cases is that they highlight not only some of the
moral conflicts and tension in contemporary China, but also reveal some novel moral ways of dealing with them.

The second implication is the individualistic nature of the new and universalistic morality that, in the present case study, is acted out by the young Good Samaritans. Unlike Lei Feng and other selfless socialist role models promoted by the government, the contemporary Good Samaritans act entirely of their free will and do not expect any official recognition or reward. In contrast, when Lei Feng helped people in need during the 1960s he did so because this was the party’s call, not his own will. This is why he was honoured as a loyal cog of the revolution. In other words, the emphasis on collective morality was promoted at the expense of individuality and individual rights, and a moral person was defined as selfless and willing to sacrifice individual interests for the larger group – be it the family, community, or the nation (see Ci 1994; and Madsen 1984). In the reform era, this collective morality of responsibility and self-sacrifice has been replaced by a new individual morality of rights and self-realisation. For example, when asked why they had helped a stranger the Good Samaritans often responded that it was out of ‘compassion,’ ‘feeling good to be able to help,’ or that ‘we are all human beings and should help one another’. Among the 26 cases I examined, the interviews I conducted, and the online materials I studied, no one referred to any collective moral values, let alone mentioned Lei Feng. Similarly, the young volunteers who rushed to Sichuan at their own expense to help the earthquake victims in May 2008 provided highly individualistic reasons to explain their actions, with many specifically pointing out that helping others makes their personal lives more meaningful (Cha 2008). It seems to me that the rise of universalistic moral values reflects the individualisation of Chinese society, an important topic that, unfortunately, cannot be pursued here.

The third broad implication is that the Chinese moral landscape, like other dimensions of social life, is undergoing a process of multi-layered and multi-directional changes instead of a linear development. Consequently, any specific change in moral discourse or practice must be studied in this larger context. As indicated earlier, China scholars disagree about how to evaluate the moral changes in the reform era, mostly because their respective studies focus on particular domains of social life or a given group of people in a given time period. For example, focusing on changes in moral discourse, Ci Jiwei and Wang Xiaoying emphasise the dissolution of responsibility ethics and the decline of collective values, while overlooking the rise of a new ethics of individual rights and freedom (Ci 1994; and Wang 2002). In contrast, to highlight the development of a new rights morality in villagers’ resistance struggles against real estate developers and predatory local government, Hok Bun Ku neglects the accompanying decline of a morality of responsibility (Ku 2003). In my own research, I have paid more attention to the changing moral landscape in the domain of private life, while rarely discussing parallel changes in public life (Yan 2003). To argue for the persistence of traditional values and ethics, Oxfeld cites countless examples of how villagers remember and remunerate favours, considering them as both social and moral debts (2004). Jankowiak (2004) chooses to focus on the positive moral changes in urban settings, such as the increasing occupational prestige of lawyers because they are perceived to pursue justice, the growing individual contributions to charity work, and the rise of a broad sense of

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9 The true Lei Feng as a person might have thought differently, but it is the role model Lei Feng promoted by the party-state that was known to the Chinese society and served as a symbol of socialist morality in the last several decades.
shared community in what he calls ‘ethical nationalism’. Yet, all these positive changes have occurred simultaneously and against the same background of a crisis of social trust (see Peng 2003; Wang and Liu 2003; and Zheng 2002). In addition, conflicting moral changes also exist at the micro level, even within the same person (Chen 2006). There are many possibilities as Chinese society is currently undergoing a rapid transition without a clear direction. Therefore, it may be too early to generalise about the changing moral landscape in one way or the other; what is needed now are more in-depth studies that will help us better understand the various aspects of the changing moral landscape in China.

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